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Performative Experiments and Cultural Re-Planning

Recapturing the Spectacle of the City

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Published in:
Nordic Journal of Architectural Research

Publication date:
2008

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Andersson, L., & Thomsen, B. S. (2008). Performative Experiments and Cultural Re-Planning: Recapturing the Spectacle of the City. *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 20(1), 39-51.
http://www.arkitekturforskning.net/Tidsskrift/2008/2008_1/Lasse_Andersson&Bo_Stjerne_Thomsen%20.pdf

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Performative experiments and cultural re-planning - recapturing the spectacle of the city

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Nordic Journal of Architectural Research
Volume 20, No 1, 2008, 13 pages
Nordic Association for Architectural Research
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TOPIC: DESIGNING THE EXPERIENCE CITY

Abstract:

The paper explores how urban experiments can challenge the commodified version of the experience city and stimulate a locally rooted and democratic version of an experience based city using an actor-network based approach focusing on a possible connection between objects and policies and between discourses and the material.

The first part of the article describes the growing and uncritical interest in the concepts of the 'creative economy', 'creative class' (Florida 2002) and their relationship with cultural production and economic growth (Bille & Schulze 2006), many of which, however, are mainly driven by political discourses producing more strategies and reports or commodified 'experience projects' that are not rooted in real democratic experiments. Instead, the experience based development should emphasize a more object-oriented and a critical approach where real urban experiments link public administrations with public participation in order to shape a cultural agenda.

The second part of the paper proposes to look at this transformation from performative experiments to political discourses in the perspectives of actor-network theory (Latour 2005), to deal

with urban experiments as quasi-objects (Serres 1994) using interactive technologies to initiate political programs with actor-oriented and locally rooted experiences. Through examples of performative experiments and their ability to create collective urban experiences, the paper explores how participatory art and embedded digital technologies create interactive spaces focusing on new meaningful interactions in the city – recapturing Debord's Spectacle of the city and society (Debord 1995). The performative experiments that work through the integration of new digital technologies are able to revitalize the spectacle as a locally rooted cultural experience. These experiments have the potential of becoming political objects of attention and together form the starting point for a bottom-up approach to cultural development if it can enable a large variety of actors and assemblies.

Keywords:

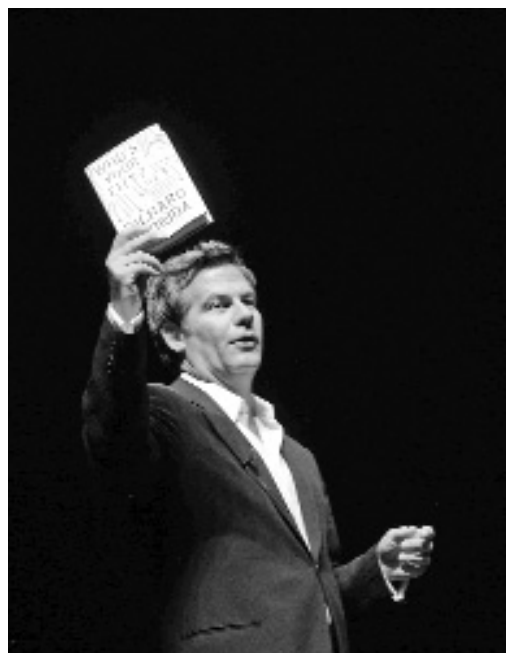
performative architecture, cultural planning, spectacle, interactive environments, public experiments, urban design, political objects

Introduction - The City between culture and the commodity

A creative or cultural turn has swept through Europe. Klaus Kunzmann (2004) calls it a 'friendly virus', this turn where culture and creativity is the new guiding force in much city development and urban design (Martin Zerlang 2005). Policy areas such as urban planning, business development and the culture sector have been strongly influenced by the notion of creativity (Evans, 2001). In this cultural turn, two books have spearheaded the development; the first one is 'The Experience economy – work is a theatre and every business is a stage' (Pine and Gillmore 1999) and the second and most influential on city development and urban design is 'The rise of the creative class' by Richard Florida (2002).

In Denmark it is found in 2000 in the rapport 'The Creative potential of Denmark' (own translation) from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The report follows in the footsteps of 'The Experience Economy' (1999). Both focus on new possibilities applying values and methods from arts and culture when developing business and places in a post-industrial context.

A second report followed in 2003, now a joint work between the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and The Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs. It underlines the new close relation between culture and business that both Pine and Gillmore and Richard Florida point to as essential if both cities, regions and the corporate sector are to become prosperous in the future!



Richard Florida at Biz-art event
in Vejle 2008 - meet the guru
Photo: Mads Hansen

Spectacle of the commodity

Seen from an urban planning and design perspective, Richard Florida is not the first to say that vibrant cities are innovative drivers of new types of development (Hall 1998, Landry and Bianchini 1995). However, Florida's notion of a new creative class valuing soft values and tolerant environments influenced by culture and art has almost unquestioned entered policies in many cities and regions in Denmark as in the rest of Europe. They all want their region or their city to have the best experiences or the 'biggest' spectacle, and they hunt in packs for it using Florida's recipe as an instrument for economic growth.

'Meet the guru' (<http://www.vejle.dk>)

This was on the front page of the Municipality of Vejle's website the 10th of February 2008 promoting the 300 euro ticket event with Richard Florida that month.

If we give a simplistic version of Richard Florida, he claims that high numbers of bohemians, gays and foreigners (cultural and artistic production) are equivalent to cities that are open and attractive to knowledge workers (his creative class). These workers again stimulate innovation and creativity in high-tech industries creating economic growth.

Our work finds strong connection between successful technology- and talent-harnessing places and places that are open to immigrants, artist, gays, and racial integration.....Such places gain an economic advantage in both harnessing the creative capabilities of a broader range of their own people and in capturing a disproportionate share of flow.

(Florida 2005:7)

But could it not be the opposite? In an article on culture in urban and regional development, Trine Bille and Gerhard Schulze point out that there is a problem with causality in Florida's argumentation. The case could in fact be that bohemians and foreigners followed fast growing firms rather than the other way around. They stress that there is a problem of endogeneity in Florida's model (Bille and Schulze 2006: 1068). And equally important according to Bille and Schulze we don't know the effect of the interurban competition that the Florida inspired policies causes. If we look at the regional and national effect of this competition on creativity perhaps the effect is zero seen in relation to economic growth because the deve-



Richard Florida at Biz-art event
in Vejle 2008 - meet the guru
Photo: Mads Hansen

lopment in one city is on the expense of development in neighboring cities and regions . The first remark in this article on the effect of new relations between culture and business seen in relation to city development is that the complexity of the subject requires more knowledge on the relation between cultural production and economic growth, before we turn it into local policies in an interurban battle for business, residents and economic growth. By this we want to enter a discussion saying that there might be a risk of failure if local urban experiments do not challenge and test the intentions in this new creative policy area.

Policymakers in cities in Denmark such as Aalborg, Odense and Horsens cannot necessarily act as their colleagues in tolerant high-tech San Francisco or in tourism based Bilbao because we implement Florida's recipe or other experience based models and projects in provincial cities in Denmark.

The local policies do not challenge the generic creative recipe

We will argue that urban experiments are needed if we want to move from a notion where

culture and business are closely linked in a spectacle of the commodity instead of a model searching back towards a version of the city that is not predetermined by pecuniary interest but closer linked to the situationist movement's version of the spectacle of society – in this case the spectacle of the city.

According to Eric Swyngedouw, the new focus on culture and business has turned Debord's situationist city into a commercialized trail strangely respectable and far from the experience of the *derivé* when drifting around their personal (experienced) City in the 1960s. It's clear that Florida's recipe tends to create normative scripts and shiny generic versions of the spectacle.

'..It (Situationist city, authors note) has become part of the commercialized cultural trail and spectacularized capitalist order that Guy Debord so sharply dissected.'

(Swyngedouw 2002:155)

In Denmark the new policies and strategies tend to forget to link the local condition - the cultural infrastructure (soft as well as hard) – with the intentions of the experience-based policies.

A particular version of this cultural economy has become popular among policy-makers, so much so that, we claim, it is possible to trace a normative script of cultural economy linked to prescriptive recommendations for economic development.

(Kong and Gibson 2005:542)

North Jutland in Denmark is an interesting case because there has been a strong link to the aforementioned national policy reports on experience economy from 2000 and 2003. In the Regional Cultural Agreements North Jutland from 2000 and 2005, the new integration of culture and business and hence the experience economy are central elements expressing the 'creative' turn where culture becomes an instrument for growth and development.

North Jutland as a pioneer region

A model that takes into account the continually increasing emphasis on culture as a source of creativity, growth and as a framework condition for settlement, residential as well as of businesses, and tourism. Cultural understanding is in a state of perpetual development and plays an important part in more and more areas.. (own translation from Regional cultural agreement North Jutland 2005 page 10-11)

The problem is that there is little correspondence between what is stated in this agreement and what is possible if you look at the infrastructural layers of Aalborg and North Jutland. The soft infrastructure (artists, events, educations etc.) is weak. (<http://www.apex-center.dk/images/stories/Apexanalyser> & http://www.aalborgsamarbejdet.dk/media/oplevelsesoekonomi_lav.pdf)

The question is therefore whether it is right to build ones strategy on a thesis that says that culture and art are the driving force for allocation of new citizens, companies and tourists? The outcome is very likely to be more strategies and reports and less action and concrete projects because the cultural producers are few.

But you could also say that it is getting difficult as most artists have moved away from North Jutland by now. I have been the chairman of BKF Nord, and the average age there is well over 60 now, right...

(artist educated from Academy of Fine Arts)

What we lack is practicing artists... There are currently none at Dreamhouse. The last one to leave was a standup comedian and an entertainer type.

(Public employee working with experience economy in Aalborg)

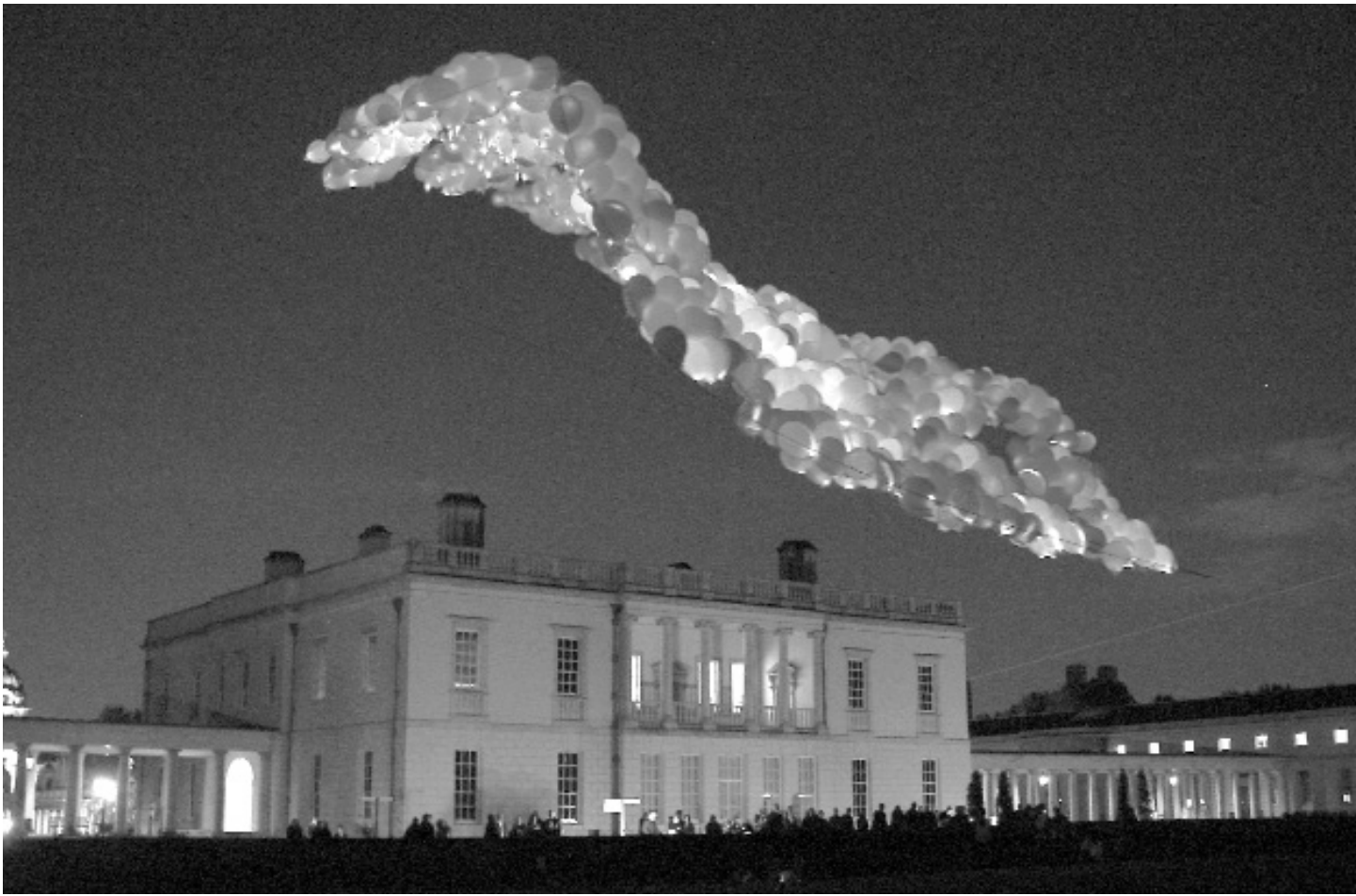
The same situation can be found in various Danish cities like Odense. Odense's cultural strategy 'Odense, Denmark's Creative City' from 2004 adapts a lot of Florida's ideas and it is almost too obvious reading the newspaper in mid February where politicians in Odense would like to adopt the Copenhagen gay parade and bring it to Odense.

The Municipality of Odense wishes to be known as the playful city – 'to play is to live', we say, and by that we mean for one thing that we wish to be a home for creativity and progressive culture. The Gay Parade would fit this line of thought perfectly, and at the same time it would send a message that the province is also open to overt homosexuality, which still has a somewhat tarnished reputation in this context, the city council member continues.. (Own translation Politikken 15.02.2008)

What these cities linking culture and business together miss are in many ways a critical mass when it comes to the core cultural producers, which again means that projects with a critical approach to the integration of culture and business are few. So, many of the projects that are created are either big, traditional, prestigious lighthouses which by nature are not experiments because a lot of money and prestige are invested in them. (Nordkraft or House of Music in Aalborg or Water Culture House and Music and Theater House in Odense). Or they are events like the gay parade reflecting Florida's recipe; or they are minor projects inspired by Pine and Gillmore's experience economy that only survive as long as the hardworking public servants feed them money and push them forward (Dreamhouse, Creative alliances and various networks in Aalborg and The Starship in Odense).

Development of strategies in closed circuits

The experienced based development tends to become a closed circuit project because in many ways it exists on a policy level and in the corridors of public administration, but not in the heads of artists unfolded in the city – crea-



ting spectacles. It has a tendency to become detached from the real cultural producers, citizens and public space because it is mostly discursive. That means that a lot of effort is put into analyzing and discussing how the culture and experience economy can become a success everywhere including inviting Richard Florida in person as in Vejle.

I also think that it has to come from the involved parties themselves. Having a group of people perpetually needing to set things in motion is no good. It needs to be a natural need, right.....It is a political agenda. No businesses have gone out and said that they want this or that they have not got any artists who have said this either. [Artist from North Jutland educated from the Academy of Fine Arts]

The city and its policies, its strategies and network constructions, talks about growth rates, experience economy, creativity and innovation, but there are very few real concrete projects to understand and develop the local version of a democratic experience city. The commodified version of the spectacle does not take risks

and it thereby loses the essential critical discussion which could be carried out around urban experiments.

A city promoting opposing hegemonic projects

The introduction and the examples above should illustrate that we strongly need models and approaches that can mediate both a democratic and critical approach to the present instrumental development of The Experience City (Andersson & Kiiib 2007). A model where concrete projects create links between administrative layers in public administration and create spaces and spectacles in the city where citizens, artist and business life can challenge each other as contending parties developing a local and democratic version of 'the spectacle'.

The second part of the article will discuss new performative experiments followed by a short detour into the world of political science and sociology trying to find out how things, concrete projects, design, art and architecture can be the offset of experiments focusing on a new

*Sky Ear in London
by Usman Haque
Photo: Ali Hasegawa*



*TXtual Healing.
Photo: Paul Notzold*

public discussion through objects and the city as space and architecture (Latour & Weibel 2005). As we will see, the integration of digital technologies might respond to new ways of discussing the city as a spectacle starting from local experiments with public participation shaping new censorships and agendas that facilitate an emergent cultural economy.

Performative experiments of the city

Looking across the contemporary spaces of the modern metropolis, new performative events are slowly again being brought to life as part of a regained fascination with the 'spectacle' and focus on new technologies to capture the attention of the mobile citizens. This fascination has relationships to previous attempts with e.g. the Parisian group *Utopie*, British *Archigram*, especially related to Cedric Price with Gordon Pask a.o. and similar trends with *Superstudio* and *Coop Himmelb(l)au* and others

but now influenced by new mobile technologies leading a change in public participation. However, many of these new 'stages' and spaces open for interaction apparently still lack political attention as regards to the ability to support a critical discussion using new digital technologies and reconfigurable domains, even that these emerging performative experiments could be an obvious response to the above relationship between art, city development and growth.

Key thinkers like Mitchell (2003) and McCullough (2004) already emphasized the influence of wireless technologies as a crucial fact of urban life as well as the potential for this new information technology to become social infrastructure acting in relationship with the architecture of the city. Experiments like the Sky Ear and Open Burble by Usman Haque strongly emphasize how performative installations can become collective environments that the citizens can negotiate in real-time with

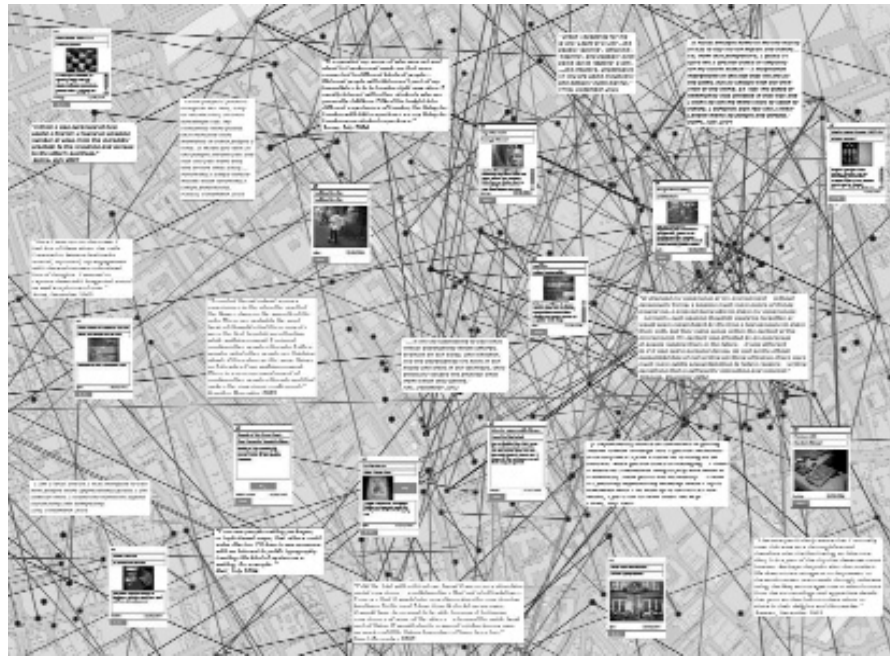
other wireless and physical infrastructures of the city. Individual actions are projected into an emergent whole reiterating a public consciousness to shape urban spaces. Upgraded digital facades like the projects by *Blinkenlights* has integrated these spectacles as part of the existing architecture when for instance they are turning the national library in Paris into an enormous collective arcade game with visuals to be seen from the whole central district. For a period, the citizens can use the new digitally enhanced facades as media of communication to create a collective experience, which is also exemplified by the increasing interest in digital facades that facilitate the collective interaction of a multitude of parties with e.g. 'Realities United' on Potsdamer Platz or the Kunsthaus Graz.

These first examples clearly indicate a shift in the use of the urban fabric as an open system for public influence following the establishment of new temporary public domains. However, not only is there a potential for citizens to use these media as a way to engage with collective events in the city. Many of these projects also focus on new ways for the public to directly shape the political agendas through sensor technologies deployed in the environment. The project *Participatory Urbanism* looks at ways to use mobile devices as networked mobile measurement instruments where the citizens act as agents of change by gathering environmental data about the city to be exchanged in public

(<http://www.urban-atmospheres.net/ParticipatoryUrbanism/index.html>). The same technologies can be used through new urban media where citizens can feed in data to live web interfaces or screens to circulate mobile real-time opinion-making through new public interfaces, as in the examples of for instance the TXT Healing project, where the citizens can tag individual buildings with sms messages (<http://www.txtualhealing.com/>).

Urban Tapestries is part of a larger research project where an experimental software platform is used to map and share information about the city. With mobile phones people are able to build relationships between places by associating stories, pictures, sounds etc. to share everyday knowledge and experience (<http://urbantapestries.net/>).

These installations mark a shift in urban participation which considers the influence of the



Urban Tapestries: Contexts Map.
Illustration: Proboscis 2006

spectacle as part of urban life and a public consciousness in relation to previous urban experiments. In the 1960s and 70s mobile environments acting in the intermediate field of overlapping networks have previously been exemplified in the perspectives of a cybernetic or mobile architecture (Pask 1968; Cook 1991; Price 2003; Sabine 1999), which, however, mostly focused on a mechanical reconfiguration of structures not including the full perspectives of new digital networks. Now these digital networks are becoming increasingly ubiquitous at the same as the deployment of sensor technologies is creating environments that are more 'aware' of urban dynamics and maybe most importantly invite the public to shape the

Interactive Façade on the Kunsthaus Graz.
Photo: Nicolas Lackner





*Open Burble in London
by Usman Haque.
Photo: Wang Wei*

imagination of a future political agenda. In this regard it is the performative act that constitutes the urban realm; however, the acts do not express something that pre-exists and do not exist elsewhere, but come into being only through the performative act with the involved participants as described by Fischer-Lichte (2005: 27).

The rise of new political objects

These experiments bring back attention to the discussion of the important issues – or objects as Latour describes it (Latour & Weibel 2005: 14) – that should be central in connecting the political with the real. Furthermore, the way these public experiments work no longer binds participation to existing class structures or social relationships and might not be attached to certain hegemonic creative classes that occupy the local domain; instead the access to specific types of technology and location determines the way citizens are invited and embodied in these new spectacles.

Turning to the Actor Network Theory (ANT) can be a way to describe how these new relationships with the city are shaping a public consciousness when “the sense of belonging has entered a crisis” (Latour 2005: 7) and identity is considered as emerging from an ensemble of relations between different places and objects in the public sphere (Abbas 2005: 93). The performative logic implies that entities are shaped by the relationship with other entities, and to engage truly with a new creative culture, we need to establish the experiments and new platforms for the creative culture to emerge. The new spectacles are increasingly mediated by sensor technologies, mobile communication and circulated in digital networks gathering around a new assemblage for the public to intertwine. This leaves open a whole new field of possibilities for the political to take hold as the public imagination is performed through the performative involvement with new kind of objects – objects that shape the collective in the same way as new internet media are becoming forums for public discussion but at the same time are highly dependent on the integration of these technologies as part of situations in specific urban spaces.

Quasi-objects as mediators

Bringing in a notion from Michel Serres we can call these object-oriented experiments ‘quasi-objects’ as through the digital augmentation, they act as a formation of a collective network out of the most intense solitudes (Serres 1994: 96) and fix temporary relations (Abbas 2005: 2). In a similar way, Latour could call these objects mediators as they are transforming or translating the meaning that they were supposed to carry (Latour 2005: 39). These quasi-objects, however, are drivers of a new discourse that makes the spectacle more than just a temporary event.

Importantly as these quasi-objects are enhanced by new digital technologies, they are acting as tools for a participatory urbanism, and they are bound to the particular kind of urban space and local actors that gather around them a specific assembly of relevant parties (Latour & Weibel 2005: 15). These experiments also exist within the new circles of a participatory urbanism that deals with the deployment of sensors in the urban environment. As Mark Shepard has noted, this is a quasi-objectivistic approach that has references to the *derivé* of situationism in the 60s (Greenfield and Shepard 2007: 43). However, instead of focusing on humans



*NoRA – Nordic Research
Application for
the Venice Biennale.
Photo: Bo Stjerne Thomsen*



*Lighting Festival in
Frederikshavn with the City Hall
by Tony Rimmer.
Photo: Jørgen Anker Simonsen &
Tom Jensen*

Lighting Festival in Frederikshavn
with the Interactive footbridge by
Kate Wilkins.
Photo: Jørgen Anker Simonsen &
Tom Jensen



alone, we should look at the possibilities offered by non-humans to enact new agendas. In the situationistic approach, society at large was engaged when people drifted in the psychogeographic landscape to generate 'data' about the ambient emotional qualities, which are now, however, transformed into new sensor systems that can engage the public in new performative experiments.

These theories of ANT and quasi-objects are relevant as technology is considered as serious agents in creating relationships between experiments and the political by enabling people to imagine reality. The quasi-objects facilitate the individual experience and interaction with the public space, at the same time as they can be influenced and change appearance according to the involved assembly. They do not contain a pre-determined political agenda but act as performative system for the citizens to take hold, in the sense that the emergence of the interactions facilitate and stimulate the cultural agenda through mediating technologies.

In a similar way, the NoRA project for the 10th International Architecture Biennale in Venice was an experiment in how performative objects can create bottom-up public domains as a future city developed from the daily life interactions (Jensen & Thomsen 2006). The project stimulated a public debate bringing new actors into a collective play with the influence of sensor technologies, and the event, whether as a simulated design process or a performance in space, became the starting point for an architecture responding to urban dynamics. The act and dynamic relationship with the participants became the important element of the performative, with the environment's ability to act or respond to changing networks and facilities as well as the acts of the individual citizens, who see the potential of public domains through the collective interactions (Jensen & Thomsen 2006).

These experiments describe how urban quality and future implementation lies in the ability to

use a quasi-object to gather around a different assembly of relevant parties (Latour & Weibel 2005) by the method of the experiment as a tool for a cultural agenda.

The shaping of a political agenda

Now how to turn this into a political discourse – how to make these new performative experiments and the rise of the collective object influence the future imagination of urban space? First of all the concept of the performative experiment, described as local actors involved in a collective experience through the interaction with urban spaces, should take hold in specific intelligent open experiments that incorporates data from the public environments. We need to look at new 'quasi-objects' as tools for experiencing a dialogue that initiates cultural development:

'We will need to think of our methods as tools for discovering a reality, or aspects of a reality, that is out there in a fairly definite form but is more or less hidden to us.'

(Law 2004: 38)

At the same time the experiments are no longer merely events to stimulate temporary excitement. They need to relate to a common political narrative. In the city of Frederikshavn, Denmark, they are trying to encapsulate this idea by establishing a Lighting Festival where the important urban monuments are reframed by new lighting designs in a workshop with both artists, students, municipal participation and local companies

(<http://www.lightvisions.dk>). In the first year, these events were primarily meant for local artists and technicians to change the visual appearance of the city by introducing new lighting technologies during a week-long festival. However, in the following years these events have been upgraded with an international staff, interdisciplinary workshops and commitment from both public and private interests. Now running in its third year, the festival is no longer just an event to celebrate a new perspective on the existing urban spaces but is rather becoming an educational ground, an international network, a research forum for local business to test out new ideas and technologies and maybe most importantly a political ground for introducing an agenda for how to design and experience the future city.

The challenge for Frederikshavn and the Lighting festival is now to hold on to the expe-

rimental aspects of the event. If it ends up as experiments of business ideas and as a tourism object then it is just yet another commodified spectacle, as is the city of Frederikshavn's other events: 'Tordenskjold Festival' (<http://www.tordenskiold.dk>) and 'Palm beach'. The Light Festival has to look at the agonistic approach to urban space valuing contending parties using performative objects as social agents in evolving urban experiments.

Towards new ways for cultural production – the first tentative remarks

Looking at the policies of creativity and experience economy, there are some problems translating them to medium sized Danish cities. Their intentions may be good but as shown earlier perhaps starting with a reverse mantra could be more productive especially seen from an urban planning and architectural perspective.

The first tentative remark is that the cultural production of middle sized Danish cities can have difficulties facilitating the ambitions of Richard Florida inspired urban cultural policies. Therefore, projects like NoRA and the Lighting Festival of Frederikshavn have the potential of becoming new quasi-objects in urban networks that are equally linked between human and non-human relations. The quasi-objects are urban experiments that stimulate a locally rooted and democratic version of an experience based city using an actor-network based approach focusing on a possible connection between objects and policies and between discourses and the material. These objects are partly shaped as common narratives that are brought into circulation in the community and partly by new technologies that

can engage the public in shaping a cultural agenda. In this way, the new mobile technologies and participation in the public sphere gather around specific intelligent experiments that focus the discussion on specific objects and projects to lead a wider cultural project. Cultural economies cannot be introduced as policies but need to be enabled by a more bottom-up approach, which the new digital and mobile technologies are able to facilitate as the examples illustrate. This brings it down to the core issue that cultural production is an emergent effect rather than a preexisting thing, and to make this emergence happen as an integrated experience, it needs to include new tools that involves the citizens in realizing the potentials of the creative economy.

It might be obvious that cultural production and innovation in and of themselves is a bottom up process where actors and agents recognize *the legitimacy of their relationships when undertaking new urban experiments through new embedded information technologies*.

This, we argue, is part of the cure to the friendly virus if we want to move from a notion where culture and business are closely linked in a spectacle of the commodity instead of a model searching back towards a version of the city that is not predetermined by pecuniary interest but closer to the situationist movement's version of the spectacle of society – in this case the spectacle of the city. If we imagine these new spectacles and urban experiments not only as reports in the public administrations but integrated as testing-grounds for a public imagination, they have the potential of initiating a broader cultural debate which opens up the city for new actors to participate in shaping a future economy from a critical object-oriented debate.

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